

**Sam Hoffman**  
**OH 2334\_10**  
**Montana Historical Society**  
**Montana Brewery Oral History Project**  
**June 7, 2017**

**Anneliese Warhank:** Today is June 7. I am at Red Lodge Ales in Red Lodge, Montana with Sam Hoffman, the owner and founder of Red Lodge Ales. We're going to be talking about his experience in the brewing industry in the state of Montana. All right Sam, let's just start off with how exactly did you get interested in brewing beer? How did you learn the craft?

**Sam Hoffman:** I always enjoyed drinking beer at a young age. Funny as that sounds. You know, I spent a lot of time in Germany growing up and starting at about twelve or fourteen they give you small of glass of beer with dinner. You know, in college I enjoyed it. In 1995, I picked up my first home brew set and started making some beers. It was after I spent some time studying in Germany that I realized I could be drinking better beer than what was often available at the time in 1995. Then, I moved to Montana in '96. After a couple years of doing work that I didn't wanna do forever, I decided it would be a good idea to open a brewery. That's the long and short of it. The short of it, maybe.

**AW:** Basically, through homebrewing ...

**SH:** Through homebrewing.

**AW:** ... you got into

**SH:** Yep.

**AW:** ... to the craft. All right. Then, what did you bring into Montana actually?

**SH:** I followed a girl out here a long time ago. That didn't work out. I ended up staying. I've been here for over twenty-some years now. I'm very happy to be here.

**AW:** Wow. I've heard that story before.

**SH:** Yep. [laughter]

**AW:** All right, you opened Red Lodge in, you said in '96?

**SH:** '98.

**AW:** '98.

**SH:** Moved to Red Lodge in '96.

**AW:** Okay. In '98 obviously, you could not serve on-site.

**SH:** Correct.

**AW:** Your only way of getting your beer out there was through distribution.

**SH:** Correct. I rented what was the Bear Tooth Food Farm in Red Lodge. It was a downtown grocery store. One reason, is it had four drains in the old meat department. The brewery was crammed into about 500 square feet. The owner of the building put a restaurant in right next to it. We sold beer to them. The Bull and Beer Saloon was the first place I ever sold a keg to which was a few doors down. For the first few years, I was selling only kegs. No bottles. I had a four-cylinder Toyota truck that I would put six or eight

kegs in and run around Red Lodge. Once a week, I would put ‘em in the truck and bring ‘em to Billings.

**AW:** You were basically self-distributing at that point?

**SH:** I was. Yep.

**AW:** When did you actually start working with distributors?

**SH:** I was bringing kegs up to Bozeman and Yellowstone [National] Park probably by 2000. Maybe in 2000 or 2001. Maybe 2002 I signed up with Cardinal Distributing in Bozeman. That was the first distributor who we worked with. Then, we still self-distribute in Red Lodge. We have a wholesaler’s license in Cody, Wyoming. Just recently, we signed with a distributor in Billings. We had been self distributing for almost twenty years up there until about three or four months ago.

**AW:** Wow! Did you ever have any issues with distributors or do you ever any kickback from tavern owners?

**SH:** You know, over twenty years there’s been all kinds of things. You know, the tavern owners in Red Lodge were always super supportive. More was convincing beer drinkers back in 1998, you know, kinda - - people would say, “We already have Bud and Coors, you know. Why do we need another beer?” You know, you could literally give your beer to some people and they wouldn’t even touch it. A lot of it was convincing the public. The tavern owners in Red Lodge have been great to me from the get go. As they generally have been everywhere.

The distributors I work with have been, you know, it’s been good. There’s been challenges, but that’s the just the nature of the beer game [unintelligible]. You know, fast forward now. There’s a ton of competition. You’re fightin’ for the attention of your distributor with all the other brands they carry. I’d say when I first started with distributors, it was more like “Hey! Don’t worry about, you know, actually, selling this to a retailer. Someone’ll wanna drink it.” You know, they didn’t have tons of brands, but they were reluctant to vary too much from their big brands whether it be Bud or Miller. You know, it’s not, you know, it’s not like it’s been a conflict or anything it’s just a matter of working out the business relationship.

**AW:** All right. You’re really the first brewer that we’ve spoken with where your brewery’s located in what’s more of a tourist destination rather than, you know, a larger, more established community. When you said that the public was harder to convince than the tavern owners, did you notice any sort of demographic that tended to prefer the craft beer over the domestics did? Were they all a challenge?

**SH:** You know, back then I would say beer drinkers were more men than women. It’s still probably the case, although more women are interested in craft beer than probably twenty years ago. The easy way out of this is to say oh the big, burly cowboy always wanted to stick to Coors and Bud. But there were some of those, but there were also cowboys that were excited to try it from the get go. I think it was just convincing people that you’re making a good product and to give it a chance. Hey, beer can taste something like besides Bud and Miller. It’s really hard to say it was the old people or young people. You know, I’m almost wanna say like the first people to come on board were probably kinda middle age men ‘cause the beer cost a little more. They had some disposable income. They wanted to try something a little different. Maybe some of them had been in the service in Europe and had that good beer. Whereas I grew up in an era where when you were young, you were looking mostly at price when you’re buying beer, you know. Nowadays, it’s totally different, you know. Young people are lookin’ to buy less beer and pay more. You get different ... all sorts of crazy flavors in their beer. So, that’s changed.

**AW:** All right. When you first started out what was the source of your brewing equipment and supplies?

**SH:** I started out at a pretty fortuitous time in that it was kinda the craft brewing industry had hit its first bump in the road, so there were a lot of breweries closing. I got a 200 gallon or seven-barrel brew house

from a brewery that went out of business in Idaho, in Ketchum. You know, I definitely I had a lot to learn, but it was enough, you know, there were three fermenters and one bright tank and a two-vessel brew house and a bunch of kegs. I pretty much had ... I cashed in an inheritance and borrowed some money against my mom's house. I had enough money to buy the equipment and few bags of grain, and a few boxes of hops. I started making beer. See what happens. Which is kinda ... I wouldn't recommend that path to anyone. You know, at the time, I was twenty-four. No wife. No kids. No nothing. I ate a lot of macaroni and cheese out of a box. Shared a bowl with my dog. It was easier. What was the original question? Oh, how I got my first equipment? Right.

**AW:** Yes, yes.

**SH:** Then, from there, you know again, for probably around until about '02 or '03 there were auctions and closings. I bought a lot of equipment very inexpensively at that time which was a huge help to the business as it was gettin' off the ground. Right away, needed ... oh hey, I need more equipment than I realized. I needed more equipment than what I had. That's, you know, it was a bad time in that there was a bump in the road for craft beer. It was a good time in that there was equipment to be had — used.

**AW:** Yeah. As far as supplies go — the ingredients? What.... Through where did you obtain that?

**SH:** You know, I did ... you know, we have the silos now, but it was all bagged malts. Pretty soon into it, I bought a car trailer. I would bring it to Billings and pick up pallets of malt that came from Vancouver, Washington. You know, I'd find a few friends to help me unload the bags one at a time. We were small enough that, you know, bought... hops come in eleven or forty-four pound boxes. Those you just have UPS right to Red Lodge. There was enough of an infrastructure back then that it wasn't too hard to source ingredients.

**AW:** All right. What were your expectations and if you happen to know the expectations of other microbrewers when you started out? What was the reality of the business when you actually got into it?

**SH:** Sure. You know, honestly at twenty-four I thought it'd be a fun thing to do. I was gonna try ... I was gonna ... I remember, I'm gonna do this for three years and then sell it to someone and do something else. Honestly, year three was probably the first year's actually, to, you know, starting to make a little money. You know, just that. I can't tell how wrong that thinking was, you know. Breweries just take a long time to get the capital. To get 'em built. To get the crowd following. The distribution network. I mean, you cannot have a three-year time frame [laughter] for a brewery.

**AW:** For any business, really.

**SH:** Yes. Yeah. You know, that was my expectation, is I do this. Have fun. Be the beer guy for three years and then move onto something else. You know, here I am almost twenty years later. You know, the expectations now I think there's enough breweries that you really have to have your A game out of the gate. I mean, you gotta have the capital. You gotta have the people to make the beer. The distributors or your distribution lined up. If you, in this day and age, don't have that, you're gonna have a pretty tough time I think.

**AW:** It's a lot more expensive now, it seems.

**SH:** Yeah, you know, there's you know, with a brewery opening everyday or whatever it was last year. Or three a day, I can't remember. You know, the used equipment market ... there's used equipment out there that tend to command 75, 80 cents on the dollarish. Sometimes a little better, which is .... You are almost better off gettin' new at that point 'cause you can get something exactly that fits your space. So yes, equipment's more. Yeah, it would take a lot more money than what I started with to get a brewery goin' today I think.

**AW:** It seems that way.

**SH:** Yep.

**AW:** All right, transitioning back to the 1990s. Can you tell me a bit more about the formation of the Montana State Brewers Association in the nineties?

**SH:** Yeah! You know, I honestly ... did that form in the nineties? I can't remember exactly.

**AW:** Well, the original Brewers ... the one that helped lobby for the tap room bills in the nineties.

**SH:** Right 'cause I'm not even sure that group helped with that.

**AW:** Really?

**SH:** I think it was ... the big players were Dennis Himmelberger who had a little brewery in Billings. The KettleHouse [Brewing Co.], which was like a You-Brew at the time. Who was the third one? Oh, it's out of business now.

**AW:** Todd Daniels?

**SH:** It's in Helena. Todd?

**AW:** Kessler [Brewing Company].

**SH:** Kessler. Those three guys kinda came up with that in '98 or was it '99. '99.

**AW:** All right.

**SH:** My recollection is the MSBA, they called the Montana State Brewers Association, formed after that.

**AW:** Okay.

**SH:** Is my recollection. But I could be wrong. I don't know. There might be some documentation somewhere ... exactly when the MSBA and perhaps just by the time I got around to joining it, that it already passed. That's possible too.

**AW:** Were you involved at all during the '99 session to lobby for the tap room bill?

**SH:** Honestly, I opened in spring/summer of '98. You know, given that the session starts in January. I'm tryin' to think if even I heard that they were having those discussions or not, you know. I don't... I think I knew Todd. Was it Todd Daniels from Kessler? I did not know Tim O'Leary at the time. I knew Dennis. Yeah, I don't have a recollection of, you know, I even knew that was going down. I musta ... I don't know. It was a long time ago.

**AW:** When did you open your tap room?

**SH:** Well, so, where the original brewery was, right downtown, the equipment ... we didn't have enough space, you know, I was having some issues with the landlord. We decided we either gotta close down or move to a bigger space. In 2000, we moved to the second brewery, which is ... have you been south of here yet?

**AW:** No.

**SH:** When you go downtown, you'll see a grain elevator. Just north of that, is a yellow steel building. It's a church now.

**AW:** Okay.

**SH:** I rented that steel building that is now church and put the second brewery in there. That was in 2000. The tap room law passed. I'm pretty sure as part of the MSBA I knew all the details. We put a 20 x 30 taproom in there. Real down and dirty, [laughter] I had a friend that had some barn wood and put some barn wood wainscoting up. I had probably a twelve or fifteen-foot bar that came with all the brewery equipment I bought in Idaho. We just slapped that thing down.

If you see it in the tap room here, there's a refrigerator door that opens up into the cooler. That was how you went to change kegs back then. You had open the refrigerator door and, like, step through like the old [unintelligible]. We basically took a saw and cut the refrigerator door off a 1950s refrigerator. It's pretty down and dirty. Yep. Then, that gave us some room. I sold that brew house to Angry Hanks. Tim Mohr was one of my first employees. They bought that, so he could start his project. We got a bigger brew house and bigger tanks. We eventually crammed a little bottling line in there and doing some limited bottling.

**AW:** When did you start bottling?

**SH:** I wanna say that was 2003 and it was, you know, they had a machine called the Meheen. We bought, like, one of the first ones he ever made.

**AW:** Oh nice!

**SH:** It was pretty bad.

**AW:** It was pretty bad? [laughter]

**SH:** Yeah, a lot of issues with that. Then, just given how small that space was, you know, I think we were maybe just sellin' to the grocery store in Red Lodge, at the tap room for people to take home and maybe a handful of places in Billings. What we did, was start... Cardinal probably ... yeah, Cardinal definitely took some cases. Although, not tons, even if the demand had been there or if they were sellin' it, we probably couldn't have kept up at that time.

**AW:** How much were you producing at that point?

**SH:** Couple thousand barrels probably we were able to squeeze out of that place.

**AW:** All right. When did you move into your current...

**SH:** We built this from the ground up. We broke ground in August or September of '08. We brewed our first batch of beer in March or April of '09. Opened the doors in May of '09, the tap room.

**AW:** When did you add the kitchen and food?

**SH:** We did right then and there. The kitchen's really small. It was gonna be an employee break room and there was a guy that was running a deli that lost his lease. He moved in. When we were building, a beer and wine license became available, so we got that. So, figured we had the beer and wine, you know, we were no longer constrained to eight PM, we might as well offer some food. It's worked out pretty well. I mean, I didn't have any restaurant experience business. The guy running the kitchen did, so that was good. And it's kinda limited menu.

**AW:** If we do need to pause it, we can.

**SH:** No, no. Nothing super urgent, I don't think.

**AW:** Okay.

**SH:** You know, it was a nice little kitchen. We've changed menu a little bit and added some things here and there. We do a lot of smoked meats in the summer. It's a nice simple formula. It's worked out well.

**AW:** It's a nice addition.

**SH:** Yeah. Yeah. It's nice to be able offer some food while you're drinking.

**AW:** Exactly. Yeah. All right. Great. Following '99, did you notice an immediate change in the industry following the tap room bill passage? Was there more of a gradual transition into breweries adding their tap rooms?

**SH:** Yeah, it wasn't overnight, you know. For me, I didn't even have the ... because I was in a brewery that was small and right next to a restaurant, I didn't have, like, a main street store front so I wouldn't be able to do a tap room. I don't know any of us really fully understood the implications of being able to have a tap room and what that would mean in the business.

**AW:** Right.

**SH:** You know, passed in '99. I'm not sure when it took effect. I didn't have one until the summer of 2000. As soon as we had it going, I go wow! It was a lot of money coming in.

**AW:** Yeah, you noticed an immediate response?

**SH:** That and that really also, whether or not people were craft beer drinkers, they started oh we'll give it a try even if I usually drink Budweiser. It really gave you an opportunity to get your product in front of people. You know, I think back then, people liked how down and dirty-that tap room was. You know, it was just a square box with a gal behind the bar. You know, get packed on weekends. People kinda like that asses to elbows feeling. I don't know ... it was similar to Blackfoot River's [Brewing Company] original tap room. I'm not sure if you remember that, you're pretty young.

**AW:** Tiny little bit. Barely.

**SH:** About the same size space and people all just jammed in.

**AW:** Or Lewis & Clark [Brewing Company] in the early days.

**SH:** Yeah. I think it took a lot of us by surprise just how much money there was in a tap room. You know, then that really kinda led to some of the initial ... I think the tavern owners had no idea. They probably wouldn't agreed to it. I think that's what led to a lot of... still to this day, ongoing strife. I don't know if you would call that. The conflict between the tavern owners and some brewers. It's not... I try to get along with everyone. It's definitely led to some of the issues that you've heard about over the last decade or so.

Really, you know, then, after five years of that, then you have this whole second wave of brewers that saw what we were doing. A lot of them planned their brewery around being mostly being a tap room. Not a lot of outside distribution, really. Really, you know, there's always about twenty, twenty-five maybe thirty breweries. Couple go out of business. A couple new ones are coming in. Then, when we hit this point, about five years ago, six years ago, seven years ago, or something, breweries were just opening all over the place. It's still ongoing. There's still breweries in the planning and everything.

**AW:** Yeah. Obviously, there were a lot of restrictions put in place right from the start. Of course, the limit — the daily limit, the hours of operation. Did you have any issues trying to stay within those regulations?

**SH:** You know, again, the tavern owners in Red Lodge have always treated me so well, I didn't wanna .... Well, A) I didn't wanna break the law, you know for plenty of reasons. B) out of respect to them. All carry my beer on tap. I was pretty' happy. Honestly, it works out well. You get this big slug of business for four hours. Right now, we're cornin' into busy season. In October and November, if you're open another four hours, you're just spreadin' the same customers out over a longer period of time.

**AW:** That's true.

**SH:** I know a lotta brewers, like we need more hours involved. Sometimes, you don't realize what good you have it. You can pack a lot of customers from four to eight. Go home and see your family, you know. You don't have to worry about it.

**AW:** I do know, at one point, there was some argument over whether the law was that you had to stop serving by eight or stop or actually close your doors by eight?

**SH:** Yeah, you know, probably by accident of horribly written language, the law said I think you could provide samples until eight PM. It didn't say anything about whether you had to drink it. Whereas a bar closing at two, the language is such that the drinks have to be off the table at two AM. That was also another source of, you know, brewer [unintelligible] for tavern owners is that I could pour a beer at 7:58 and someone could stay until 8:30 to finish it. You know, a lot of this is addressed through administrative rules in Montana, where the Department of Revenue has pretty big leeway to write to rules to define law. At some point, they were, I can't remember exactly ... they had it in their head, they either wanted to make it eight PM beers off the table or nine PM. We went to the meeting. We all agreed on ten PM. At the last second, it got changed back to nine PM and that's where it is now.

**AW:** All right.

**SH:** I've had the beer and wine and license long enough now, that I don't even really think about those issues ...

**AW:** True.

**SH:** ... as much. I can see both sides of it. As a brewer, with a tap room, you wanna be able to sell as much product. As a tavern owner, you invested in a license, you know, you don't want people that haven't had to make that investment to be able to serve a forty-eight-ounce pitcher at 7:59 and let someone drink it for the next three hours. I can see both sides.

**AW:** Right. Yeah.

**SH:** There was also a big kerfuffle about decks and patios.

**AW:** Oh really?

**SH:** That was addressed via administrative rules.

**AW:** What was that? I don't think I've heard about that.

**SH:** You know, tap rooms were puttin' patios and decks. I can't remember if we built ours before or after. At some point, we went up and there was an administrative rule meeting that specifically allowed brewers to have patios and decks. It's still on the books to this day. I was a big part of ensuring that. We built a little deck on our old tap room, going off the back. Yeah, it was one of those things where the tavern owners actually didn't want us doing it, you know. Like, in their mind, a tap room should be, you know, four walls made out of concrete ...

**AW:** Right.

**SH:** ... and some uncomfortable benches. People cornin' in and drinkin' a few samples and leave. Whereas brewers wanted to make it more of an inviting thing and have a garden or a patio.

**AW:** Exactly. Even alcohol, in general, I know ... as far as tap rooms, bars, and restaurants, if you're serving outside you still need some sort of barrier ...

**SH:** Yes.

**AW:** ... by state law.

**SH:** The rules and they may have just changed to make more lenient. The initial rules said your outdoor seating had to be restricted view and access from streets and sidewalks. So, you had to have a fence around it. Whereas a tavern can have an outdoor area where it's more just of a dividing rail. I don't know what the politics were back then when language going on there.

**AW:** Yep, some interesting language. Definitely. All right. So, the 2017 legislative session saw the barrel limit increase from 10,000 barrels per year to 60,000, did you play any role in this session? What do you think allowed for this bill to finally pass?

**SH:** I did not play a role. You know, with the beer and wine license, it didn't really affect me.

**AW:** Oh.

**SH:** So, I sat at the sidelines.

**AW:** With the beer and wine license, does that allow you to produce more than 10,000 already?

**SH:** Well, brewers were always able to produce more than 10,000 barrels. They just had to shut their tap room.

**AW:** Exactly.

**SH:** With the beer and wine license, you know, it's a totally, you know. I don't own the beer and wine license, my mother does 'cause I'm not allowed to own both. You can't be both a manufacturer and a retailer in Montana.

**AW:** Right. Three-tier system.

**SH:** Essentially, we have no sampling or sample room or tap room at the brewery. It's all done at Sam's Taproom which is my mother's beer and wine license.

**AW:** Interesting.

**SH:** The licensed premise with a beer and wine license. You know, the '17 thing, I mean, to back it up. You know, I mean shit. Almost every session there's a bill some sort or another, but you know, there was in successive years under Republicans ... '09 and '11, you know, brewers had to push to increase tap room privileges. Tavern owners hated it. They defeated it. Then, in '13 the tavern owners had a bill that would've restricted what tap rooms could do. That got defeated.

You know, then in '13 we decided to have this coalition meeting which I was a part of, where we go and try to work out a compromise. There was a bill in '15 that would've allowed brewers to own the beer and wine license as a solution. The tavern owners were on board with, the wholesalers not on board with. Minority brewers not on board 'cause they don't want to buy a license. That bill got defeated.

Coalition lasted up until this session. The tavern owners did not like this bill. Concessions were made to the wholesalers to get them on board. Then, there was, you know, a bunch of amendments and whatnot to make it all happen. That's what I'm aware of with the '17 legislation. My opinion, it was a massive expenditure of money and political capital to pass a bill that only benefits the three biggest brewers in the state.

**AW:** Then your current production level is below the 10,000 barrel?

**SH:** We're at about 8600 in '17, '16. We're at a point where we're not growin' a lot just 'cause there's a lot of competition and we really don't want to. I'm kinda done buyin' more tanks and stuff. I can grow past 10,000 and it's not an issue 'cause of our beer and wine license.



**AW:** Right.

**SH:** You know, but my feeling is everyone thinks they're gonna get to 10,000 barrels. It's gonna be some tough going to get there if you're not already there for a while. There's a lot of competition out there and makes it harder to show up and sell thousands of barrels of beer anywhere now. Too many established breweries.

**AW:** Do you see any issues coming with that increase to 60,000?

**SH:** Negative or ...

**AW:** Yes, negative.

**SH:** ... for brewers? No, I mean there's definitely ... it's a good thing, you know, that a brewer can keep their taproom open past 10,000 barrels. I just feel like it only benefitted the three brewers who were already above 10,000 barrels. Now, it's gonna be a lot harder for the group to go the Legislature and say we want something else because they'll be like well, you just made this huge argument that all you needed was this and then we can all grow and grow and grow. Why are you askin' for more help? You know, it was kinda done over the corpse of the tavern owners, who are now just gonna dig in their heels even more next time if something comes around. I definitely think it's a benefit to the brewing industry, particularly for the three bigger breweries in the state. But I think a lot was expended to get there and it's just gonna hurt the ability to do anything in the future.

**AW:** Can you speak a little bit more about the coalition?

**SH:** Yeah.

**AW:** So, it's formation and the reasoning behind it?

**SH:** Sure

**AW:** Its name first off. It's official name.

**SH:** I don't blow what the official name is.

**AW:** Okay [laughter],

**SH:** The Alcohol Beverage Coalition.

**AW:** All right.

**SH:** Let's call it that. Yeah, I mean, I went... it was ... it probably met every other month, every three months for two or three years up in Helena. It was a big push for me because it's an eight-hour round trip and then you have a four or five-hour meeting. Then, you gotta drive back over, you know. It was often the dead of winter, so you had to get a hotel room or something.

**AW:** Right.

**SH:** You blow, I went. I guess being an optimist, I went in thinkin' "Hey, we can really make some progress if we're all sittin' down." Really, we didn't. It was, you know, essentially there's tavern owners, distributors and brewers with brewer issues. Eventually, they added liquor stores, distilleries, and that's it. Maybe there was someone else.

You know, the tavern owners always had a gaming. It was tavern owners, gaming industry and restaurant industry, so they kinda had three votes that were all very similar. Whereas brewers got one vote, you know.

It was a little disappointing to have spent that much time going to Helena to make so little progress. I feel

like if we had come to an agreement that the distributors, the retailers and brewers all could live with, then it would have been very easy to pass. It just never happened. Towards the end of it, leading up to the '17 session, I just stopped going 'cause I didn't ... I couldn't justify the time expenditure with everything else that I had going on. Seeing that likely no consensus was gonna come out of it. I don't know if it's gonna keep going or not. I mean ....

**AW:** Do you know if other brewers have the same feelings about it that you do?

**SH:** You know, a lot of brewers feel like the tavern owners might have an outsized voice at it or that the whole goal was to get to a bill that tavern owners could agree with it and the brewers liked that we go along with it. I mean, ultimately, one reason we never had a consensus, as I was, you know, fighting pretty hard for the brewers to make a bill that brewers could live with. So, I think ... I don't wanna speak for all the brewers in the state. I think, if nothing else, at least we got to a point where we 'were talking with each other, instead of, like, as far brewers talking with distributors and retailers. That was good. Yeah, I guess I'd hate to speak for every brewer in the state saying whether they think it was a good idea or a bad idea, or some shady backroom thing. As a participant, you know, *we* weren't trying to hide anything from anyone. We were trying make some kinda deal that would improve the regulatory atmosphere for brewers. It didn't work out.

**AW:** All right. What other involvements have you had to help advance the industry? Any other organizations or local or statewide?

**SH:** I was in the ... I was the treasurer and the president of the Brewers Association at one point.

**AW:** The current Montana Brewers Association?

**SH:** Yes. You know, I definitely had a pretty open door policy with helping brewers get started over the years. A lot of people call and ask for, you know, advice and information. Other than that, you know, I've been to brew fests. I don't know, [laughter]

**AW:** Have you won any awards at brewfests?

**SH:** We just won one at the Missoula one for the Garden City Brew Fest. We got the Best IPA, Best Montana Beer, Best in Show.

**AW:** For which beers? That's great.

**SH:** It was the Bruno's IPA. We have this new rotating IPA series.

**AW:** Okay.

**SH:** Fortunately, we're relatively new in the Missoula market. The wholesaler is kinda gettin' a few of our flagships out. They basically sent that keg 'cause they didn't sell it. It was kinda the end of that seasonal's life. So, like, we won this medal and there's no more to sell to anyone in that market, [laughter] You know, great guys. Let's remember that for next year. The NABA, was just this weekend, which is a kinda regional brew fest in Idaho. They have ....

**AW:** What is it the Rocky Mountain Brew Fest or brewer's association?

**SH:** Something like that.

**AW:** Yes. In Idaho Falls.

**SH:** In Idaho Falls. It seems weird 'cause it's not a big destination town, but they're actually judging about 1800 beers.

**AW:** I've been there. It's pretty big.

**SH:** Yeah, I've been to the Brewfest once. It was bigger than I anticipated. We won three medals there. You know, we're disappointed if we don't win at least couple medals. Then, the Great American, we've been going to for about ten years. We've won either four or five medals. That's becoming very challenging. They judge 6, 7000 beers.

**AW:** Yeah.

**SH:** It's tough to medal, but we've won a few.

**AW:** Great! All right, tell me about the concept behind your name, logo and your branding efforts?

**SH:** [laughter] When I started there was no ... not a whole lot of thought or money or artwork or branding. We've been through two or three logos over the years. The first money and thought we put into it, I had a friend who had kinda some art marketing background. She moved to Red Lodge for a while. She came up with the kinda mountainy thing we have now.

Then, probably four years, maybe, we hired Massive Studios in Bozeman. They kinda took our packaging to the next level. It's been interesting. I mean, it's very expensive to do branding and marketing. It's necessary. You know, Massive, I think was a pretty well-known firm, but even with them, it takes a lot of coaching, you know, just 'cause you hire someone at 100 bucks an hour doesn't mean they're gonna know exactly what you want. You still have to invest a lot of your time making sure that message and look gets onto the packaging.

We're rolling out like this whole wingman, where we do half of our flagship IPA and half of a seasonal IPA, that was kinda the third round of packaging they produced. It was kinda the best. It's like every time we do something, it gets a little better. I kinda wanna go back and make our regular labels look like those labels, but I really don't want to spend the money right now. It's an ongoing thing. You know, you always gotta spend a little money and thought.

Something, for better or for worse, we opened the Cider Mill in Billings in January. It has a pub and a beer and wine license. It's been takin' a lot of my time. For the last year or two, we haven't done a lot of new branding or marketing. I feel like I need bring that back to tie our Cider Mill to the brewery to the pub to the tap room and kinda have a more cohesive story. Our social media has always been abysmal. You know, gotta get that even off the ground would be nice.

**AW:** It's hard.

**SH:** You know, when the times were ... it was easy to grow twenty percent a year, it didn't really matter. But now it's a competitive market. Your beer not only has to be good, but you have to have a good brand, a good message. You need to spend some money on that. Probably in '18, I'll circle back around to focusing on more of our branding of what we're doing. Telling the story.

**AW:** Great. When did you come up with the good times, good beer slogan?

**SH:** That's been with us for a long time. I've kinda liked it. It doesn't get as much use as it should maybe. Yeah, that probably dates back twelve, ten, twelve, fourteen years.

**AW:** Oh wow!

**SH:** Yeah.

**AW:** Great! You came up with that one yourself?

**SH:** [laughter] I guess. Yeah.

**AW:** All right. How important is the industry, the brewing industry, to the Montana economy, do you feel? I guess how important is it now, versus twenty years ago, when you first came on the scene?

**SH:** Sure. I mean it's grown a lot. On our end, we provide a lot more, better jobs than we used to do.

**AW:** How many people do you employ now?

**SH:** Probably close to fifty, between the brewery, the Cider Mill, the pub and the taproom. Production on the brewery probably seven or eight people in production. We got two in sales. We got Andy here, who's the ... I don't know .... What do you call yourself, Andy? Office manager?

**Andy Simpson:** Sure, [unintelligible]

**SH:** We got a mechanic look at...

**AW:** Jack of all trades.

**SH:** Yeah. Just on brewery side, there's probably .... Andy, you're the HR guy. We got about fifteen people over here? The brewery side?

**AS:** Yeah. About right.

**SH:** Certainly, to our local economy, you know, we have more jobs and we pay more than we used to. We have vacation, retirement, crappy health benefits. Then, on a state-wide, I mean it's so important for tourism that breweries now. It's kinda there's a crowd that almost won't go on vacation somewhere there's no local beer to try. I think it's been important for that development. Just, you know, Montana's the biggest beer barley growing state in the country so I think it's important to have some breweries here to highlight, you know, ag products that's grown here. I think that's some of the economic benefits of having, you know, a strong craft brewery scene in Montana.

**AW:** Okay, great. How important are microbreweries, particularly the tap rooms, to the social fabrics of the communities?

**SH:** They're pretty important. You know, one thing we've done here, is the community pint nights we do in the off seas ... eight months a year, basically, were .... I'm sure they have 'em in Helena. Non-profits can come in and, you know, they usually make a 100 bucks or whatever. More than that, they can do a bigger raffle or fundraiser and then it's just gettin' the word out and being social ... a lot of tap rooms are pretty kid friendly. It's kinda changed the culture of drinking, I think, a little bit over the years to where we're focused on less and higher quality. Higher prices, and less just downing large volumes of lesser beer. That's kinda a benefit, I think. You know to make it more about the flavor and social drinking rather than heavy drinking. I think in the years I've lived here, there's been a big, probably nationwide, change in how people approach their alcohol consumption. I know a lot of tap rooms do a lot of stuff. I gotta be honest, I've got two small kids. I just don't get anywhere anymore, so I can't say I've been to a whole lotta tap rooms lately. I'm pretty sure a lotta of 'em are doing kinda what we're doing with trying to be an active member of the community.

**AW:** Yep, it almost seems like if you don't have a community pint night, you're a little behind.

**SH:** Yeah. Yeah. You know, I know in Billings, we've been doing it at the Cider Mill. You know, not only are there other breweries up there, but a lot of taverns have kinda caught on to that too. It's almost gettin' to be like, you know, you really have to go out and find people, you can't just slap a sign up there in the Billings, hey! Come on down doing a pint night 'cause they're already doin' it in another bar, brewery or taproom or something like that.

**AW:** What have been some of your favorite beers that you've brewed over the years?

**SH:** The Czechmate Pilsner is my favorite. It's a Bohemian-style pilsner. I'm a pilsner guy. We, you know, sorry Montana, we use German Pilsner malt for that which you kinda need to make a good pilsner. We do full secondary aging. Lagering. You know, we don't try and rush it through. It's really one of my favorites. You know, the ... for a long time, the Bent Nail IPA which is our flagship, was my favorite. We started brewing it in '01. There really weren't a lot of IPAs [India Pale Ale] out there. I kinda enjoy our seasonal IPA series. I do like pale ales and hoppy forward beers. I like mixin' up. I don't think I have one beer I just drink the whole time.

**AW:** Well, really it just depends on the season? Right?

**SH:** Yeah, yep. You know, we're doing ... we got a shandy we're releasing tomorrow.

**AW:** Oh nice! Missed it by one day.

**SH:** I can get you sample, if you want, when I take you in the back. It's kinda been an interesting, progression, you know, for awhile as our beers got bigger and bigger. It's been fun to see some lower alcohol beers out there. Craft beers, breweries. Especially as I get older, you know, I can't drink as much. You know, all that, it's kinda nice to have some lower alcohol options out there. So, it's been kinda fun to delve into some of the session IP As and shandys and lower alcohol beers.

**AW:** Yeah, definitely. All right, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**SH:** Nope. It's been fun! It's been a good ride! Hopefully I'll be here another twenty years.

**AW:** Perfect, alright thanks, Sam.

[Recording ends]